



**21-22 MARCH**

**2nd INTERNATIONAL  
CONFERENCE ON  
ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN**

**Abstracts & Proceedings**

**e-publication**



International Organization  
Center of Academic Research  
[www.ocerints.org](http://www.ocerints.org)

**ISBN: 978-605-06286-7-8**



## 2nd INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON ARCHITECTURE & DESIGN

Online Conference

21-22 March, 2022

<https://www.ocerints.org/darch22>

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## THROUGH HIS EYES: THOUGHTS OF HAJEEDAR ON NATIONAL ARCHITECTURAL IDENTITY OF MALAYSIA

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### Abstract

This paper aims to report factual findings on the National Architecture Identity of Malaysia from the perspective of Ar. Hajeedar Abdul Majid. For almost 42 years, Ar. Hajeedar and his associates have been actively upbringing Malaysia's now booming architecture industry. The research is conducted through a descriptive analysis of an extensive interview session with the architect. Among the significant findings, it is evident that an innovative approach in architecture and ensuring harmony are highly significant in the discourse of national architectural identity. Being innovative means improving on what is already in existence. Therefore, being innovative is essential to gaining a competitive edge in every area of life. Another key finding is that harmony can only be achieved with genuine understanding, a deep awareness, and mutual respect for our differences. Harmony is, therefore, the positive and colorful celebration of our cultural diversities and the development of civilization and the human race, irrespective of our origins.

**Keywords:** Hajeedar, National architectural identity, Malaysian architecture.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

Malaysia today is a proud multi-racial country, the need to create a national culture is not only for projecting a cultural identity overseas but, more importantly, because its validity as a national entity depends a great deal on the cultural unity among its various communities, comprising *Bumiputra*, Chinese and Indians. Most architects actively practicing in our country were trained overseas, strongly influenced by the modernist and postmodernist movement; they no longer appreciate vernacular and regional characteristics. In the long run, it seems the only way to realize the nation aspires to rely on homegrown architects who understand the local

environment, climate, materials, and techniques and respect the country's cultural heritage.

The architecture in Malaysia is strongly influenced by western ideas, ranging from the Neo-Classical and Postmodernist styles. It can be said that since the early 1950s, leading architects and public servants have come across a problem which was that many new buildings built lacked the Malayan identity and were somehow insensitive to the Malayan context. (Hegvold, 1999). Through the years, they have tried to produce architecture that reflects Malaysia. The early identity approaches saw Malaya's universal and progressive interpretation (later Malaysia) as a democratic and multi-ethnic country. (Lim et al., 2010; Rasdi, 2010; Utaberta & Rasdi, 2013). Buildings such as the Parliament, National Mosque, and National Museum were examples. (Yee et al., 2021).

In our efforts to evolve a Malaysian identity in architecture, we can have two extreme approaches: direct and indirect. Traditional building forms are interpreted creatively in the direct approach, whereas designs are developed through their general principles only in the indirect approach. In reality, the difference between the two is significant and provides a wide range for various alternative strategies.

## **2 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 The crisis in the discourse on the national architectural identity of Malaysia**

The National Architectural Identity itself is connected to many other things. When we decide to seek knowledge through Quran, sunnah, and our heritage identity, it will help the community improve the built environment in terms of cultural and local identity. Our heritage roots are undeniably the most substantial aspect of our life, and if be turned as an advantage, extraordinary things will fall into our laps. (Goh & Liauw, 2009). As a new independent generation, it is our responsibility to produce an architecture that is new and fresh with distinctive qualities by studying and perceiving methods used by our ancestors to develop the civilization further. (Nayar, 2015)

However, the lack of community support, especially from private organizations such as developers, was a significant reason why there was a setback in realizing the national architecture identity. (Hussain, 2015; Ismail, 2018; Mohd Rasdi, 2005). To get an appropriate architecture concept and philosophy in Malaysia, the history of traditional architecture is to be made a core study. There is a need for comprehensive knowledge for appropriate and balanced decisions between human needs and the natural environment. (Asif et al., 2020) Suppose we care to reflect on the essence of the reminders. In that case, the built environment will be better because the preservation of National Architectural Identity has its own importance, not only for the architect but also for the future of generations and the country itself.

### **2.2 Hajeedar's Passionate Journey**

Dato' Ar. Haji Hajeedar Abdul Majid started his architectural profession in Brighton, U.K, and shortly after, he joined Urban Development Authority (UDA) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, as Architect. Ar. Hajeedar established his firm, Hajeedar and Associates Sdn. Bhd in 1978 in Kuala Lumpur. Since then, his firm has commenced several challenging projects in terms of design and conservation. (Othman, 2014)

In reference to Ar. Hajeedar's works, Holistic design is a design approach that sees design as an interconnected whole that is part of the larger world. (Siraj & Ismail, 2018). But our country's built environment reached a satisfactory level of designing holistically? To follow the holistic approach, the building must have its own architectural identity. An important aspect that has to be inculcated and nurtured among the knowledge seekers in built environment discipline and the professionals is a state of mind that respects and upholds national and cultural values. This paper has taken into account such issues and reflects on Ar. Hajeedar in an effort to find appropriate answers.

### **2.3 Design Philosophy of Dato' Ar. Hajeedar**

The philosophy of an architect reflects its true self for an architect like Dato Ar. Hj Hajeedar, having a multi philosophy, can help to improve himself mentally and spiritually. Dato' Ar. Hj Hajeedar subscribes to a contemporary design style endeavoring to fulfill the client's brief to design spaces and buildings for the intended function, respect climatic constraints, and respond to sustainable environmental, social, and cultural contexts. Dato' Ar Hajeedar emphasized that every project he must do has a common sense for everyone to understand. As mentioned by him, his philosophy is,

*'Architecture is common sense; anything else is nonsense.'*

There are three fundamentals that he always stands for three fundamentals before designing something: food, shelter, and clothing. When we have done the basic human needs, we go to the arts to give uniqueness to the design. Ar Hajeedar loves a holistic design approach. When he talks about the holistic approach, it provides healing environments that directly relate to human welfare, promoting preventive medicine to the user by designing a well-functional architecture. (Nayar, 2015)

Not only by referring to holistic architecture, but he also said that architecture itself is a holistic career. The architect must know everything to design excellent buildings for a better environment. Because it is known that buildings have a profound influence on our health, physiological and energetic state of being. There are five principles from the Khalifah Islamic planning strategies which he practiced. His strategies are layout direction, environmentally friendly, improving social sustainability, and responding to the five human senses.

Incorporating these principles into the environment allows a full-circle approach to our genetic makeup. It makes sense that if our buildings support healing, they should have these principles as generative design paths. Everything in the universe follows these geometric principles. These principles can generate a foundation for building composition, thus creating spaces that benefit users mentally and spiritually.

### **3 METHODOLOGY**

This research adopted a qualitative strategy to inquire about a specific issue, i.e., the national architectural identity of Malaysia from the perspective of Ar. Hajeedar. Data were collected through a semi-structured interview session and recorded manually on a notebook for further analysis. The interview was conducted on the 22nd of October 2019, from 3.00 pm to 7.00 pm, at the architect's firm, Hajeedar and Associates Sdn. Bhd., located at Jalan Telawi 3, Bangsar Baru, 59100 Kuala Lumpur, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur.

The semi-structured interview consisted of three main questions covering the topic of the architect's design philosophy, implementation of his philosophy into practical projects, and his thoughts on the national architectural identity of Malaysia. The first two questions aided me in understanding how the architect approaches the issue of national architectural identity. The interview was analyzed through content analysis, and the findings will be presented in the next section.

### **4 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

#### **4.1 Adaptability and Reinterpretation of Cultural Values**

Dato' Hajeedar stated in the interview that everyone could be an architect in the early civilization. Architects are not only individuals who design the building, but architects are problem solvers and providers of solutions. In the ancient period, human identity is fundamental, reflecting basic human needs; food, shelter, and clothes. Identity evolves, thus creating various identities all around the world. We must learn to accept and appreciate the differences, not condemn other cultures. The Asian experiences have subtle yet distinct characters, expressed in built forms and flavors to create their own identities, albeit influenced as practiced through regional intra-migration. The cultural values of a community are also developed by other influences such as the natural and geographical environment, climate, and social practices. Thus, the keyword or the most crucial thing to be considered in the architectural identity of Malaysia is the synthesis of modern, vernacular, and past traditional ideas encompassing two themes; adaptability and reinterpretation.



Fig. 1. Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah, Petaling Jaya: Strong functional emphasis with traditional space planning to integrate cultural values. (Source: Google street view)



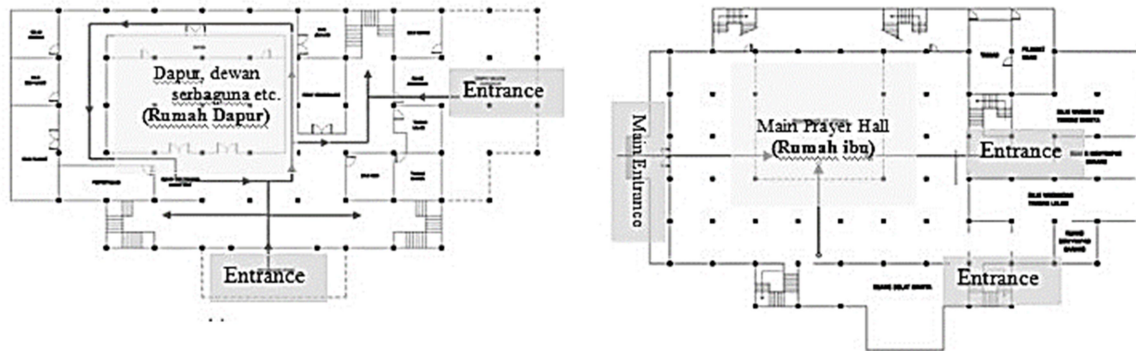


Fig. 2. Ground floor (left) and First-floor plan (right) Masjid Jamek Sultan Abdul Aziz Shah

#### 4.2 Embracing the Strength of a Multi-Racial Country

National Architectural Identity should reflect the cultural integration of society in Malaysia as it is a multi-racial country. It is a beauty and challenge for the Malaysians to appreciate each other and enjoy sharing the same home. The ability to adapt to the changes is the most crucial trait that a person, company, or nation wants to excel in the 21st Century. The national culture is mixed and flexible because the identity is not descriptive. Although the fundamental is stated, it can be modified, and the modification can be better than the origin. Each race has a different house layout and style. For example, in Malay traditional houses, to be built on stilts is an opportunity to have good ventilation, to protect the user from wild animals and floods. We have spaces like *serambi*, *anjung*, and *Rumah Ibu*; although sometimes the design has changed over time, Malay people still have the same transition spaces to protect the user's privacy. The same goes for Chinese houses where Feng Shui application, location of the altar, and a comfortable house flow are required to create a comfortable home for them to live in. Traditional architects designed all these spaces to suit their needs.



Fig. 4. Sultan Haji Ahmad Shah Mosque IIUM: A mosque with the thought of every single user, race, culture, and religion for the international community of the affiliated university. (Source: IIUM official website)

#### 4.3 Appreciation of Tangible and Intangible Heritage Qualities

The buildings in Malaysia now are slowly falling into an identity crisis, most adopting modern western styles and being lost in translation. There needs a sincere understanding and celebration of cultural differences. Most Malaysian cities have been filled with buildings out of context, unsuitable for tropical climate, wasteful energy use, expensive to maintain, and unfamiliar with the local way of life. The skyscrapers such as Petronas Twin Tower, Tun Razak Exchange, and Merdeka PNB 118 act as the new national symbols and landmarks. What makes it unique is the cultural identity applied in the buildings, suitable local environment, and materials suitable for the climate. In the meantime, some attempts have been made to incorporate Malay vernacular features in the design of public buildings with various degrees of success. There is a tendency to overemphasize the physical form in the expression of identity without respecting other aspects such as human activities. Our heritage line is priceless and should be vastly appreciated and carried on into our future generations. Should there be no action taken by the respective parties to overcome the problems, the issues will further continue to pose a threat to the nation.





Fig. 3. Masjid Saidina Abu Bakar As-Siddiq, Bangsar: Emphasis on functionality to adopt the traditional Malay house as precedence. (Source: Google street view)

The public or the end-users will continue receiving the shoddy quality of work as humanistic values be sacrificed for materialistic values and developments of the built environment become commodities rather than social obligation. The public or the end-users will continue receiving the shoddy quality of work as humanistic values are sacrificed for materialistic values and developments of the built environment become commodities rather than social obligation. Harmony can only be achieved with sincere understanding, a deep awareness, and mutual respect for our differences; Harmony is, therefore, the positive and colorful celebration of our cultural diversities and the development of civilization and the human race, irrespective of our origins. Historically, Malaysia has inherited a variety of ethnic and cultural entities and has often been referred to as the melting pot for Asian culture and experience. This is echoed in the country's old tagline, Malaysia Truly Asia. These tangible and intangible Heritage qualities are priceless and need to be sustained and protected at all times to ensure that they are a worthy inheritance for future generations.

#### 4.4 Learning from the Past to Plan for the Future

The fundamental aspects that should be at the forefront of national architectural identity discourse are to appreciate the differences. There is a need to learn from the past, understand the present, and plan the future, and each architect will have to play their role. To create new space and design by respecting all races, cultures, and privacy. From the interview, he stated that the three principles for the formulation of the national culture influenced the architecture in Malaysia, which is the Malaysian national culture based on the indigenous culture of the region, the elements of national culture from different races, and Islamic factor that affect the formation of the culture. Since architecture is one of the most important manifestations of the culture itself, it is only natural that the three principles become the guidelines for the efforts to evolve the architecture with a national identity.

Moreover, if all these structures were torn down to make way for tall, glistening towers, Kuala Lumpur would lose its soul and become just one of the many skyscraper decked cities that dot the globe. The possibility that architects who are currently practicing in Malaysia were trained overseas has been influenced by the modernist and postmodernist movements. Maybe they no longer appreciate vernacular and local characteristics. In my opinion, the architects who trained or studied overseas must realize the nation's aspiration is relying on homegrown architects who understand the country's local environment, climate, and cultural heritage.

## 5 CONCLUSION

In brief, the studies and practices of Ar. Hajeedar always reflects on the human aspects, and he holds firm on the importance of Malaysian National Architectural Identity. Everything has to have a relation with fundamental values, applications from the Quran and Sunnah, the community and environment needs in a current living situation, and the ancestral cultural heritage of Malaysia. The architect always relates his story with his understanding of the Quran and Sunnah, which has brought him to fulfill his design ideas mainly through the Islamic perspective. Ar. Hajeedar highlights the importance of knowledge as he believes that

once people have the information; their brains can seek out positive and negative information. In other words, they will learn what to do and what not to do. This is why knowing oneself is vital because we actually will learn about ourselves and our background, knowing that remembering our roots and taking care of them is all we have to do.

There is a need to be consciously aware of individuals and the community's physical, social and spiritual values towards a harmonious and sustainable quality of living. As mentioned in Surah Yunus,

*"The human race is the custodian (Khalifah) on earth..." (Surah Yunus, verse 14).* (Sahih International, 2004)

The buildings in Malaysia now are slowly falling into an identity crisis, most adopting modern western styles and being lost in translation. There need a sincere understanding and celebration of cultural differences. Most Malaysian cities have been filled with buildings out of context, unsuitable for tropical climate, wasteful in energy use, expensive to maintain, and unfamiliar with the local way of life. The skyscrapers such as Petronas Twin Tower, Tun Razak Exchange, and Merdeka PNB 118 act as the new national symbols and landmarks. What makes it unique is the cultural identity applied in the buildings, suitable local environment, and materials suitable for the climate. In the meantime, some attempts have been made to incorporate

Malay vernacular features in the design of public buildings with various degrees of success. There is a tendency to overemphasize the physical form in the expression of identity without respecting other aspects such as human activities. Our heritage line is priceless and should be vastly appreciated and carried on into our future generations. Should there be no action taken by the respective parties to overcome the problems, the issues will further continue to pose a threat to the nation. The public or the end-users will continue receiving the shoddy quality of work as humanistic values be sacrificed for materialistic values and developments of the built environment become commodities rather than social obligation. The public or the end-users will continue receiving the shoddy quality of work as humanistic values are sacrificed for materialistic values and developments of the built environment become commodities rather than social obligation. Harmony can only be achieved with sincere understanding, a deep awareness, and mutual respect for our differences. Harmony is, therefore, the positive and colorful celebration of our cultural diversities and the development of civilization and the human race, irrespective of our origins. Historically, Malaysia has inherited a variety of ethnic and cultural entities and has often been referred to as the melting pot for Asian culture and experience. This is echoed in the country's old tagline, Malaysia Truly Asia. These tangible and intangible Heritage qualities are priceless and need to be sustained and protected at all times to ensure that they are a worthy inheritance for future generations

Architects and future architects, as the Khalifah, need to realize that they need to resolve community and environmental issues in order to build a better world. Furthermore, the ultimate challenge is finding creative solutions within the environment while upholding one's heritage, learning mutual respect, and accommodating the existence of other heritages. But when the issue is solved, it will be a worthwhile contribution to the future.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research was conducted under the Theory of Architecture course at Kulliyyah of Architecture and Environmental Design, IIUM. We thank Izzatun Munirah Binti Abdul Latiff, Nurul Syazana Binti Zahari, Nur Sabrina Binti Othman, Norsyazwina Binti Jamal, who greatly assisted the research by conducting the interview process and analyzing partial data for interpretation.

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